[Editorial commentary on the 'Fragments' of Reimarus, 1777]

[Introduction]

The anonymous fragment 'On the Toleration of Deists', published in the last issue,[1] made a particular impression on one or two of my readers, to whose approval I am by no means indifferent. The less I expected it here, the more agreeable it was, 'like a green oasis unexpectedly encountered in a desert'. The image is not my own, as can well be imagined: it was used by one of the readers in question,[2] who wrote to reward and encourage my efforts. For he adds that he would regard it as true pedantry if I, as a librarian, were now to put aside completely a set of thirty-year-old papers merely because they were perhaps not yet sufficiently decayed and illegible. He even begs me to provide the public with further extracts in the next issue, including, if possible, the boldest and strongest sections, so as not to lead those of weak faith to suspect that all sorts of unanswerable objections were being kept secret.

Now I fear the charge of pedantry too much, and am too convinced that the good cause can stand up to the above suspicion, to hesitate for one moment in fulfilling this request, which I know is supported by other like-minded readers. But I can hardly come up at once with the boldest

[1] The first issue of Lessing's periodical *Zur Geschichte und Literatur. Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel* [*On History and Literature: From the Treasures of the Ducal Library in Wolfenbüttel*], in which he was authorised to publish new discoveries from the library without referring them to the Brunswick censors. Although he claimed to have discovered the anonymous 'Fragments' in the library, he had in fact obtained them from the late Reimarus's daughter in Hamburg.

[2] No evidence of such appeals by readers survives.

and strongest material, for the papers are still too disorganised, and the continuity is often lost where one least expects it. So until I have become more familiar with them, readers will have to make do with the following fragments, which I append without further preamble.

I merely ask permission to add, in conclusion, a few hints concerning the manner in which critics have sought, especially in recent times, to counter and negate all these arguments. I regard it as my duty to add such an appendix, however unequal I consider myself to the task.

[Five substantial extracts (or 'fragments') from the anonymous work of Reimarus, all sharply critical of the Bible, are inserted at this point; Lessing gives them the following self-explanatory titles:

1 On the denunciation of reason from the pulpits
2 On the impossibility of a revelation which can justifiably be believed by all of mankind
3 On the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites
4 That the books of the Old Testament were not written in order to reveal a religion
5 On the story of the resurrection].

Counter-propositions of the editor

And now enough of these fragments! – But any one of my readers who would rather I had kept them to myself is surely more *faint-hearted* than *well informed*. He may be a very *pious* Christian, but he is certainly not a very *enlightened* one. He may genuinely *mean* well by his religion, but he ought also to have more *faith* in it.

For how much remains to be said in reply to all these objections and difficulties! And even if nothing whatsoever could be said in reply – what then? The learned theologian might ultimately find them an embarrassment; but what of the Christian? He certainly would not! The former might at most be at a loss to see the supports with which he had hoped to underpin religion so badly shaken, and to find the buttresses with which, God willing, he had so well preserved it completely demolished. But what do this man's hypotheses, explanations, and proofs matter to the Christian? For him, Christianity is simply *there*, that same Christianity which he *feels* is so true and in which he *feels* himself so blessed. – When the paralysed patient *experiences* the salutary shock of the electric spark,

what does he care whether Nollet, or Franklin,[3] or neither of the two is right? –

In short, the letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion. Consequently, objections to the letter, and to the Bible, need not also be objections to the spirit and to religion.

For the Bible obviously contains more than what pertains to religion, and it is merely a hypothesis that it must be equally infallible in this additional respect. Religion also existed before there was a Bible. Christianity existed before the evangelists and apostles wrote about it. Some time elapsed before the first of them wrote, and a very considerable time elapsed before the whole canon was established. Thus, however much may depend on these writings, it is impossible for the whole truth of religion to be based on them. If there was a period in which this truth was already so widely disseminated, and in which it had already won over so many souls – but without a single letter of *that* material which has come down to us having yet been recorded – then it must also be possible for everything that the evangelists and apostles wrote to be lost once more and for the religion they taught to continue to exist. The religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; on the contrary, they taught it because it is true. The written records must be explained by its inner truth, and none of the written records can give it any inner truth if it does not already have it.

This, then, might be the general response to a large portion of these fragments – in the worst case, as already noted. This case would arise if a Christian who is also a theologian should find no satisfactory answer within the spirit of his own confessional system. But how can he discover whether he has the answer, and how can we be confident that he does have it, if it is not permissible to state, freely and plainly, every variety of objection? It is not true that all the objections have already been stated. It is even less true that they have all been answered. A great many of them, at least, have been answered as deplorably as they were stated. To the superficiality and ridicule of the one side, the other has not infrequently replied with pride and disdain. Great offence has been taken if one side equated religion with superstition; but the other side has not scrupled to denounce doubt as irreligion, and belief in the sufficiency of reason

[3] Jean Antoine Nollet (1700–70) and Benjamin Franklin (1706–90) were among the pioneers of electrical theory.

as infamy. The one party has disparaged every clergyman as a scheming priest, while the other has disparaged every philosopher as an atheist. Thus each side has turned its adversary into a monster so that, if it cannot defeat him, it can pronounce him beyond the law.

In truth, that man has yet to appear, he has yet to appear on either side, who can attack or defend religion in a manner befitting the importance and dignity of the subject – with all the knowledge, all the love of truth, and all the gravity it requires! – To launch or repel assaults on individual bastions is neither to mount a siege nor to raise it. Yet little more than this has so far been attempted. No enemy has yet surrounded the fortress completely; none has mounted a simultaneous assault on all its fortifications. The attacks have always been mounted only on an outwork, often of very little significance, which has been defended with more fervour than astuteness on the part of the besieged. For their usual maxim was to direct all their fire at the single point of attack, regardless of whether or not another enemy was meanwhile scaling the undefended walls. What I mean is that a single proof has often been overstretched, to the detriment of all the others as well as itself. A single nail was supposed to support everything, and it supported nothing. A *single* objection was often answered as if it were the *sole* objection, and often by means of arguments which were very open to objections of their own. Another even more ill-conceived procedure was to leave the attacked position undefended, abandoning it contemptuously to the enemy and moving to another instead. For in this way, the defenders gradually let themselves be not so much *expelled* as *frightened away* from all their defences, only to be obliged, before long, to throw themselves once more into the position which they originally abandoned. Anyone with the least knowledge of the latest works on the truth of Christianity will readily think of examples to fit every feature of this allegory.

How close our author came to the ideal of a true opponent of religion can certainly be deduced, to some extent, from these fragments, but not adequately appreciated. He seems to have occupied enough ground for his approach trenches, and he sets about his work in earnest. – May he soon call forth a man who comes at least as close to the ideal of a true defender of religion!

So as not to pre-empt this man but merely to let others judge how much he would have to say, and secondly, to counteract the initial panic which might seize the timorous reader, I hasten to add to each individual

fragment some thoughts which have impressed themselves on me. But if I do more in the process than I initially asked permission to do,[4] this is because I abhor that tone of derision into which I could easily lapse if I tried to do *only* the latter. For there are certainly enough men now who defend religion as if they had been expressly suborned by its enemies to undermine it. But it would be an insult to religion if I were to suggest that these were the only men who still stand before the breach. And how do I know whether they too do not have the best intentions in the world? If *they* cannot defend their good intentions, what defence will *I* have if I miss the mark as widely as they do?

I

The first fragment takes issue with something which can do nothing to make Christianity acceptable. So if there have been theologians who insisted on it, they must have been very strongly convinced of its necessity. Would they otherwise have tried, in full view of everyone, to set mantraps beneath the very gate which they urged people to enter?

And there certainly were such theologians. But where are they today? Has the boot not long since been on the other foot? The pulpits no longer resound with the need to subordinate reason to faith; they now resound only with talk of the intimate bond between reason and faith.[5] Faith has become reason reinforced by miracles and portents, and reason has become faith reinforced by rational thought. The whole of revealed religion is nothing but an additional endorsement of the religion of reason. It either contains no mysteries at all, or if there are any, it is immaterial whether the Christian associates them with this or that concept or with no concept at all.

How easy it was to refute those incompetent theologians who had nothing to fall back on but a few misunderstood passages of Scripture, and who, by condemning reason, ensured that the reason they offended continued to fight back! They incensed everyone who had, or wished to have, reason.

[4] See p. 62 above.

[5] Lessing refers to the so-called 'neologists', including A. F. W. Sack, J. F. W. Jerusalem, J. G. Töllner, and J. A. Eberhard, who preached a rational form of Christianity, ignoring or playing down those elements (including the central mysteries) which could not readily be rationalised.

How delicate a matter it is, on the other hand, to start an argument with those who both glorify and neutralise reason by denouncing the opponents of revelation as opponents of common sense! They hoodwink all those who claim to have reason but do not have it.

Nevertheless, the truth must undoubtedly lie once more where it always lies – between the two extremes. Whether there can and must be a revelation, and which of so many self-proclaimed revelations is likely to be true, is something which only reason can decide. But if there can and must be a revelation, and once the true revelation has been identified, reason must regard it rather as an additional proof of its truth than as an objection to it if it finds in it things which are beyond its comprehension. Anyone who polishes such things out of his religion might as well have no religion at all. For what is a revelation which reveals nothing? Is it enough to retain only the name while rejecting the substance? And is it only the unbelievers who discard both?

Thus a *certain* subjugation of reason to the discipline of faith is based not on this or that passage of Scripture, but on the essential definition of revelation. It may well be that our author had a better grasp of the passages in question (and I could name more than one worthy interpreter who found nothing more in them than he did). It may well be that he is more accurate than those wretched preachers who resort to our earliest ancestors' lamentable fall from grace in order to prove something which has no need of this proof. He himself acknowledges that the Mosaic story is not to blame for this abuse. But while it is not true that it can be held responsible for a *subsequent* corruption of human reason, he does seem to me not to have realised its full implications either. For when he says 'that given this story, it was rather the duty of the preachers, as true pastors, to recommend sound reason and its employment to their congregations as an infallible criterion of divine knowledge and pious living, given that our earliest ancestors fell from grace precisely because they failed to make use of it', he addresses only half of the problem. For the story also indicates the cause which prevented their reason from functioning. In a word, it is the power of our sensuous desires, of our obscure representations [*Vorstellungen*] over even our clearest knowledge, which the story expresses so vividly. The Mosaic narrative either reports the first sad experience of this power, or furnishes the most telling example of it. Whether it is fact or allegory, it shows that the source of all our transgressions was this power alone, which was as firmly implanted in Adam, notwithstanding

his creation in God's image, as it is innate in us. We have all sinned in Adam because all of us must sin; and we are image enough of God if we are not exclusively sinners, if we have it in us to reduce that power and can use it as readily for good as for evil actions. The so frequently ridiculed 'fairytale' of Moses is at least fully open to this edifying interpretation, provided we do not import into it those accommodations which a later system discerned in it, and leave accommodations to themselves.[6]

As already stated, a *certain* subjugation of reason to the discipline of faith is simply based on the essential definition of revelation. Or rather – for the word 'subjugation' seems to suggest violence on one side and resistance on the other – reason *surrenders* itself, and its surrender is merely an acknowledgement of its limits as soon as it is assured that the revelation is a genuine one. This, then, is the outpost in which we must firmly stand our ground; and it betrays either woeful vanity if we let mischievous mockers *ridicule* us out of it, or despair over the proofs for the reality of revelation if we *withdraw* from it in the belief that we need no longer take such proofs very seriously. What is meant to be rescued by such means is all the more irrevocably lost; and when the opponents of Christianity exaggerate the incomprehensible aspects of revelation, they are merely setting a trap for those of its defenders who are not entirely sure of their ground, and whose main concern is to salvage their reputation for shrewdness.

Another trap which is laid even for the better sort of theologians is to express dissatisfaction with existing versions of the catechism, and to make their defective presentation responsible for the fact that religion makes so little impact. Now I do not wish to deny that there is room for improvement in such textbooks; but caution is required before one proceeds, with well-intentioned haste, to correct those very things which some people are so anxious to correct, including our author himself when he accuses them of 'a lack of rational religion and of a rational progression from it to revelation'.

In my opinion, this lack is on the one hand no lack at all, and on the other, it would be extremely dangerous to remedy it. I mean *really* to remedy it, for there can be no question of anything else, because any minor adjustments would only make those dear old books more stark and stale than ever.

[6] Accommodations: here, theories that human reason is inherently flawed by original sin.

Revealed religion does not in the least presuppose a rational religion, but includes it within itself. If it did presuppose it – that is, if it were unintelligible without it – the deficiency of which the textbooks are accused would be a genuine deficiency. But since it actually includes it, since it contains all the truths which rational religion teaches and merely supports them with another kind of evidence, it is still very relevant to ask whether the unitary mode of demonstration employed in textbooks for children and ordinary people is not more convenient and more useful than a rigorous separation of rational and revealed doctrines, each demonstrated in accordance with its own distinct source.

It is at least certain that the transition from purely rational truths to revealed truths is extremely difficult to accomplish if one has first enjoyed the luxury of the precise and comprehensible proofs of the former. One then expects and demands the *same* clarity and comprehensibility from the proofs of the latter, and anything not proved *in the same way* will seem not to be proved *at all*. I recall here what happened to me in my youth. I wanted to study mathematics, and I was given the elder Sturm's *Tables*,[7] in which chiromancy was still included among the mathematical sciences. When I encountered this, I was completely nonplussed. My limited understanding suddenly ceased to function altogether; and although an art which promised to acquaint me with my future destiny held no small attraction for me, I felt as if I had exchanged a pleasant wine for insipid sugar-water when I transferred my attention to it from geometry. I did not know what to think of a man who had combined two such disparate things in a single book, so I took my leave of him and sought another teacher instead. But had I been obliged to regard this man as infallible, the question-begging proofs of chiromancy, whose arbitrariness was so apparent to me, would have filled me with fear and distrust towards those mathematical truths which were so congenial to my understanding, even if I had as yet grasped some of them only by memory. I could not possibly have regarded them both, geometry and chiromancy, as equally certain; but I might well have come to regard chiromancy and geometry as equally uncertain.

I hardly think it worth the effort to repudiate the suspicion that I am trying to insinuate that the proofs of revelation and the proofs of

[7] Johann Christoph Sturm, *Mathesis compendiaria . . . tabulis . . . comprehensa* [*A Brief Guide to Mathematics, in Tabular Form*] (1670).

chiromancy are of equal weight. Of course they are not of equal weight: their specific weights are absolutely incommensurable. But both kinds of proof nevertheless belong to a single class: both are based on evidence and on empirical propositions. And the contrast between the strongest proofs of this kind and proofs which flow from the nature of things is so striking that every artifice designed to reduce this striking divergence and to smooth it out by introducing all kinds of intermediate gradations is futile.

II

The second fragment says a great many perfectly correct and wholly unexceptionable things. Let us suppose that it contains only such things! Let us suppose that its proof that a revelation which could justifiably be believed by *all* of mankind is impossible is conducted with all due rigour – as indeed it is!

But does not this problem immediately suggest its own answer? If *such* a revelation is impossible – well, then, God could not make it possible either. If, however, a revelation is nevertheless useful and necessary, would God choose to provide *no revelation at all* just because he could not provide *such* a revelation? Would God deny this benefit to the whole human race just because he could not enable all human beings to partake of it at the *same* time, and to the *same* extent? Who has the heart to answer this question in the affirmative?

It is enough if the highest wisdom and goodness, in providing a revelation which it could not provide in a universal and absolutely clear form, adopted the only means whereby the *greatest* number of people could enjoy it in the *shortest* possible time. Or will anyone presume to demonstrate that this did not happen? That if this revelation had been imparted at another time, to another people, in another language, it would have equipped more people, in a shorter time, with those truths and motives for virtue on which Christians, as Christians, can now pride themselves?

Let anyone who presumes to do so first name to me a people in whose hands that initial capital of revelation would have been more likely to gain greater interest than in the hands of the Jews. That infinitely more despised than despicable people was nevertheless absolutely the first and only people in the whole of history to make a business out

of communicating and disseminating its religion. The zeal with which the Jews conducted this business was already censured by Christ,[8] and ridiculed by Horace.[9] All other peoples were either too secretive and jealous with regard to their religions, or much too coldly disposed towards them to trouble themselves in the least with their dissemination. The Christian peoples, who subsequently followed the Jews' example in their zeal, inherited it only in so far as their religion was grafted on to Judaism.

But even if, our author might insist, a well-founded knowledge of revelation, such as *all* human beings cannot possibly possess, is indispensable to *all* human beings for salvation, how can the millions of people acquire it – ?

Let us not think such a cruel thought through to its conclusion! – Woe betide the human race if no reply can be given to this thought, other than perhaps to point out that the author has added up the total before the account was closed, and to inform him: 'Christianity is for all time; it gains new ground every year, although neither missions nor learned proofs of its truth help it to do so; even if the Christian nations have hardly increased in number over the last few centuries, more people have surely become Christians within these nations; the time must come when this imperceptible growth will reveal itself to the eyes of an astonished world, and a fair wind must arise which will combine the as yet scattered flames into one all-consuming fire, so that the number of lost souls will finally stand in the same ratio to the number of saved as the latter now does to the former.' –

Woe betide the human race if this alone, or some other petty distinction, is to be its consolation! – For example, that we must distinguish between revelation and the books of revelation; that the former is only a single, very comprehensible truth whose history is contained within the latter; or that salvation is not tied to laborious study of the books in question, but to the sincere acceptance of the revelation itself, which must lead to considerable reductions in the cumulative total [of lost souls].

For woe betide the human race if even a single soul is lost in this *economy of salvation*! The loss of this *one* must be of the most pressing concern to *all*, because any individual could well have been that one. And what everlasting bliss is so rapturous as not to be marred by this concern?

[8] Matthew 23.15. [9] Horace, *Satires* 1.4 and 1.9.

But what need is there for this agonising? – So unmerited a defeat for mankind, a victory awarded to hell by God himself, is a miserable fantasy. Let us trace this false alarm to its source. One word will be enough to dispose of it.

It was neither a doctrine of Christ, nor has it ever been a generally accepted doctrine of the Church, that revelation is also necessary for the salvation of those who are ignorant of it, or who cannot attain reliable knowledge of it. Even those who, in all the various [Christian] denominations, have made the harshest pronouncements on this matter and taken the view that no exceptions can be made to that universal necessity have nevertheless circumvented its sad consequences, giving back with one hand what they had taken with the other. It is immaterial with how good or ill a grace they did so, how unphilosophical a view they adopted, or how faithful or unfaithful they were to their own doctrinal system; it is enough that they acted as they did, and that they did so willingly and joyfully. Their wish itself exonerates their hearts, and their acknowledgement that God can grant dispensation where the theologian cannot, and that God will know of alternative solutions with no need for any dispensation, reconciles us to their system.

And it is here that I must explicitly repeat that general criticism of our author to which I have already alluded, although it serves as much to excuse him as to censure him. He treats everything contained in a certain doctrinal system of Christianity expounded in certain symbolic books as the only true and authentic Christianity. Propositions without which Christianity cannot survive and which were explicitly taught by its founder and propositions which were merely inserted in order to provide better links between the former or were thought to follow necessarily from them are treated by him as identical. It is nevertheless right and proper that, when Christianity is attacked, all its sects should be treated as one, and no objection to Christianity should be accepted as valid unless none of these sects can answer it. But this does not really apply to that doctrine of the complete corruption of human reason in divine matters which our author found it so easy to refute in the first fragment, or to that doctrine of the indispensable necessity of a clear and distinct faith for salvation which is the object of the second fragment, or to the doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture as he expounds it here – and as indeed he had to expound it in order to lend all his objections, including the most trivial ones, an equally high degree of

credibility. – This, at least, is the judgement I am bound to reach on the evidence before us.

III

The objection contained in the third fragment has often been raised and often answered. But *how* was it raised and answered? It has surely never been presented so thoroughly, so circumstantially, and taking such full account of all possible evasions as it is here. One need only ask how successful such authorities as Clericus, Calmet, Saurin, or Lilienthal[10] have been in answering it: their success, I fear, has been minimal. The orthodox believer will therefore have to think of a completely new solution if he is unable to defend his position, yet also unwilling to make any concessions.

He will, however, regard it as a major concession if he were to admit that so great a multitude could not possibly make such a crossing [of the Red Sea] in so short a time, and to try to overcome the difficulty by suggesting an error of transcription in the number of Israelites specified in the text, so that instead of 600,000 fighting men, only 60,000, or even 6,000, departed from Egypt. – Now I really cannot see what harm such an error could do, even if it were quite deliberately committed. In the earliest times, people had a very unclear conception of large numbers, and there will often be a perfectly innocent explanation for the fact that a very large number was sometimes expressed as one figure and sometimes as another. There would be ample scope for doubt regarding all those ancient battles where one writer gives one figure for the number of enemy casualties, another gives a different figure, and all of them give far higher figures than are compatible with the other circumstances they relate. Why should we be more exacting in the case of miracles, where the precise number of people rewarded or punished by them is much less important, and nothing whatsoever depends on it? For whether Moses divided the sea with his rod and led millions across over dry land, or Elisha did the

[10] Jean Le Clerc (Clericus) (1657–1736), Dutch Arminian theologian, author of a commentary on the Pentateuch; Augustin Calmet (1672–1757), Catholic theologian, author of a Bible commentary; Jacques Saurin (1677–1730), French Calvinist, author of a work on the principal events in the Old and New Testaments; Theodor Christoph Lilienthal (1717–82), Lutheran theologian, author of a work defending the literal accuracy of the Scriptures.

same to the Jordan with the cloak of his master and crossed it alone,[11] is not the one as much a miracle as the other?

That is certainly what I would think. But the orthodox believer cannot readily concede this much so long as any possibility of salvaging even the smallest details of the report remains unexplored. – As perhaps here. – For what if the miracle assumed the following form? – When the Israelites had reached an arm of the Arabian Sea which they necessarily had to cross if they were not to fall into their pursuers' hands, a strong wind – helped, if we wish, by the receding tide – drove the water out *seawards*, and held it back long enough for them to cross at their leisure. Meanwhile, the dammed-up water sought another way out, broke through behind the Israelites, rushed in *landwards* by another route, and it was in this new inlet that the Egyptians perished. What could be less contrived than this explanation? Is it not in the nature of water, if its usual course is blocked, to overflow or break through at the first weak or low point in the surrounding land and scour out a new course for itself? And what difficulty in our fragment is not removed by this explanation? The Israelites, however great their number, no longer need to hurry; they can move just as slowly as they need to with their children and cattle, bag and baggage; and if they had not crossed the whole of the broad, dried-up inlet by the beginning of the morning watch, the water of this inlet was already behind them, and their enemies drowned in the very water on whose bed the Israelites had escaped.

I am not aware that any interpreter has offered a similar explanation and treated the text accordingly, for many passages in it would certainly lend themselves very well to it – better all round, in fact, than to any other explanation. Even on the closest scrutiny, I can find only one word in Luther's version of the Mosaic account which appears to conflict with it, namely 'and at daybreak the sea returned to *its* course', or in Herr Michaelis's translation,[12] 'in the morning the water returned, and resumed its *usual* flow'. If it was to *its* course that the sea came back, or if it was its *usual* flow that it resumed, any new inlet or overflow certainly does seem a very contrived assumption. It does, however, appear that Luther was following here not so much the original [Hebrew] text as the Vulgate,

[11] 2 Kings 2.14.

[12] Johann David Michaelis, *Deutsche Übersetzung des Alten Testaments, mit Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte* [*The Old Testament in German Translation, with Notes for the Uneducated*] (1769–85).

which reads 'at daybreak the sea returned to its previous place'; and Herr Michaelis has perhaps read a little too much of his own hypothesis into the text, for the literal reading is simply 'and the sea returned with the morning in its strength', so that it is not even certain whether the sea returned in its strength, or whether it returned when the morning was in its strength.

But be that as it may, whether or not my interpretation is defensible, I am far from believing that the orthodox believer needs to take refuge in any idea of mine. As already stated, he need only hold fast to his position, and he can dispense with all the ingenious ideas with which others pretend to come to his assistance while in fact merely trying to lure him out of his defences.

But what I call his position is that small, impregnable area in which no attacks from without need trouble him, namely the one satisfactory answer which he can and should give to so many objections, as in the present instance. He need only say 'But what if the *entire* crossing was a miracle? What if the miracle consisted not only in the drying up of the inlet, and the speed with which such a multitude crossed over in so short a time was also part of the miracle? – I have no objection if, in the first part of this miraculous occurrence, it is also claimed that natural causes were also involved – not just the wind, which is mentioned in the Scripture itself, but also the ebb tide, which it does not mention; and if *one* ebb tide is not enough, I could even accept two successive tides, ebb upon ebb, of which neither Scripture nor the admiralty pilots at Cuxhaven have ever heard.[13] I readily concede that it is sufficient for a miracle if these natural causes are no longer active now, or no longer in this particular way, although their past operation, directly based on the will of God, was nevertheless predicted in advance. This much I readily concede. But no one must try to defeat me with my own *concessions*; no one must turn what I admit may accompany a miracle, without its ceasing to be a miracle, into an indispensable requirement of miracles in general; no one must flatly deny a miracle just because no natural forces can be specified which God might have used. The drying up of the inlet was caused by the wind

[13] Lessing adds a reference here to the explorer Carsten Niebuhr's *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und anderen umliegenden Ländern* [*Travels in Arabia and Neighbouring Countries*] (1774–8), on how Niebuhr received a negative answer on consulting the Hamburg pilots as to the soundness of Michaelis's theory that a double ebb-tide might be caused by a landwind.

and an ebb tide: good – but it was still a miracle. The speed with which the people crossed was achieved – I know not how; but is it therefore any less miraculous? It is for that very reason all the more miraculous. It certainly sounds very clever when your author refuses "to let anyone give wings to the Israelites and their oxen and carts". But God himself does in fact say that he carried the Israelites out of Egypt "on eagles' wings" (Exodus 19.4). And what if the language has no means of expressing the nature of this miraculous speed other than this metaphor? Permit me to discern even in a metaphor employed by God more reality than in all your symbolic demonstrations.'[14]

And if the orthodox believer answers thus, how can one refute him? We can shrug our shoulders at his answer as much as we like, but we must still let him stand where he stands. That is the advantage enjoyed by a man who remains true to his principles, and who would rather follow *less than fully demonstrated* principles than not follow them *consistently* in his words and actions. This consistency, which enables one to predict how a man will speak and act in a given instance, is what makes him a man and gives him character and constancy, those major assets of a thinking individual. Character and constancy can even correct one's principles over time; for it is impossible for a man to act for long in accordance with certain principles without noticing if they are false: anyone who regularly makes use of calculations will soon notice whether or not his multiplication tables are correct.

Not orthodoxy itself, therefore, but a certain squinting, lame, and inconsistent kind of orthodoxy is so obnoxious! So obnoxious, so repellent, so flatulent! – These, at least, are the appropriate words to describe *my* sentiments.

IV

The Old Testament makes no mention of the soul's immortality, or of any rewards and punishments in an afterlife. So be it! If we wish, we may go even a step further. We may assert that the Old Testament, or at least the Israelite people as we encounter them in the Old Testament writings before the time of the Babylonian captivity, did not even have

[14] Demonstrations based on the 'symbolic books' or doctrinal compendia.

the true concept of the oneness of God. If we consider the people at large and disregard those more enlightened souls such as the sacred writers themselves, we can even lend this assertion a high degree of probability. It is certain at least that the oneness which the Israelites attributed to their God was not at all that transcendental, metaphysical oneness which is now the basis of all natural theology.[15] The ordinary human understanding had not yet risen to *that* level in such early times, least of all among a people who were so indifferent to the arts and sciences, and who so stubbornly refrained from all dealings with peoples more knowledgeable than themselves. Had they possessed the true and genuine concept of a single God, they could never have abandoned it so often in favour of other gods. They would not have dignified false gods with the same name; they would not have described the true God so exclusively as *their* god, as the god of *their* country, or as the god of *their* fathers. In short, the one God meant for them no more than the first, the foremost, and the most perfect of his kind. In their view, the gods of the heathen were also gods; but among so many gods, only *one* could be the mightiest and wisest, and this mightiest and wisest god was their own Jehovah. So long as they found no reason to doubt that power and wisdom in which *their* god surpassed the gods of all other peoples, they remained loyal to him. But scarcely had they concluded that this or that neighbouring people, thanks to the protection of its god, enjoyed some benefit which they lacked, and which their Jehovah consequently could or would not grant them, than they secretly turned away from him and fornicated with the gods of the supposedly more fortunate people; and they did not return from them until they had paid for their lust through the loss of greater goods, by forfeiting more essential benefits. Only when they had learned, in Babylonian captivity, to make a little more use of their understanding, when they became better acquainted with a people who had worthier ideas of the one God, when for the first time the writings of their own lawgiver and prophets became more widely known among them, when they saw how many great and unrecognised truths were contained in these writings or could be read into them, when they recognised how, even according to these writings, their Jehovah possessed a more sublime unity than that which merely placed him at the head of all other gods – only then did they suddenly become a quite different people, and all

[15] Cf. *The Education of the Human Race*, §§14, 17, and 22 (pp. 220–2 below).

idolatry ceased among them. If this sudden change, which no one can dispute, cannot be explained by the nobler conception which they now formed of their own god, then nothing can explain it. One can become disloyal to a national god, but never to God, once one has recognised him.

As already suggested, let us take this further step beyond the objections of the fourth fragment, and add that, just as Moses himself had no conception of the infinite being at the start of his mission – would he otherwise have asked him his name?[16] – God descended to his level and *announced* himself to him not as the infinite God, but only as one of the particular gods with whom superstition had associated different countries and peoples. God was the god of the Hebrews; and when the Hebrews had had enough of their god, what was more natural than that they should try another god instead?

Even then – even if one could justifiably deny the ancient Israelites that great advantage, based rather on *tradition* than on *demonstration*, of having known the one true God – even then I would still feel able to justify God's ways with them.

From things such as these, at least, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the divinity of the books of the Old Testament. For this divinity must be proved by quite other means than through the truths of natural religion which appear in them. Truths, the clearest possible, the most sublime, the most profound truths of this kind, may be contained in any other book of equal antiquity, and we now have the evidence to prove it – evidence which gives the lie to many a learned deduction of the divinity of the Bible based in part on the claim that only the Old Testament teaches the oneness of God. Both in age and in worthy conceptions of God, the sacred books of the Brahmans must be a match for the books of the Old Testament, if the rest of them is anything like the samples which reliable men have only now brought to our attention.[17] For although the human understanding has undergone only a very gradual development, and truths which are at present so evident and intelligible to the most ordinary individual must once have seemed highly incomprehensible, hence directly inspired by the deity, and been considered worthy of acceptance only as such, there have nevertheless been privileged souls at all times

[16] Exodus 3.13.
[17] E.g. Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan* (1768).

and in all countries whose thoughts, by their own efforts, transcended the sphere of their contemporaries; they hastened towards the greater light, and even if they could not communicate their feelings to others, they could at least tell them about them.

Nothing derived from men of this kind – some of whom continue to appear from time to time, without always receiving just recognition – can be used as direct evidence of a divine origin. But if the presence of such evidence cannot prove this origin, neither can its absence disprove it; and books may very well come from God or be written by means of higher, divine inspiration even if only a few traces, or none at all, of the soul's immortality and of retribution in the afterlife are to be found in them. These books may even contain a religion of salvation – that is, a religion through whose observance a man can consider himself assured of happiness as far as his thoughts extend. For why should a religion not adapt itself to the limits of his longing and desires? Why should it necessarily have to enlarge their sphere? A religion of salvation such as this would certainly not be the Christian religion of salvation. But if the Christian religion could only appear at a certain time and in a certain area, did all the previous ages and all the other areas therefore necessarily have no religion of salvation at all? I will gladly concede to the theologians that the *salvational element* in the different religions must always have been the *same* – provided they will concede to me in turn that people need not therefore always have had the *same conception* of it. God might well wish to save the good people of all religions *in the same respect* and *for the same reasons*, without therefore having imparted to all of them the *same revelation* in that respect and for those reasons. –

Some time ago, a little essay was circulating in manuscript among a certain group of friends. It contained the outlines of a full-scale book, and was entitled *The Education of the Human Race*. I must confess that I have already drawn verbatim on some of the ideas in that essay.[18] So what is to prevent me from including here – or rather, what is more appropriate than that I should include here – the first part of that essay in its full context, which is so closely related to the content of our *fourth fragment*? I can answer for the indiscretion which I thereby commit, and I am convinced of the sincerity of the author's intentions. He is also

[18] See note 15 above.

not nearly as heterodox as he appears at first glance, as even the most scrupulous readers will concede if he should eventually see fit to publish the whole essay, or even its fully expanded version. But here, as promised, is the first part of it – on account of the relevant content made use of above.

The Education of the Human Race

> [Lessing here inserts paragraphs 1–53 of this work, without revealing his authorship. He issued the entire work three years later, again adopting the role of 'editor', as a separate publication. For the complete text, see pp. 218–40 below.]

And so the author arrives at the second great step in the education of the human race. The child's motives for obedience give way to the incomparably more stimulating prospects of the youth. Future honour, future prosperity replace the sweets and playthings of the present. But all these further speculations are irrelevant to our present topic, and I shall say no more; besides, a foretaste does not require the whole dish to be served.

V

On the contradictions in the story of the resurrection, so forcefully put to us by the fifth fragment, my thoughts are as follows.

§ The witnesses of Christ's resurrection were not the same people who transmitted the reports of these witnesses' statements to us. For even if the two are the same on one or other occasion, it is nevertheless undeniable that no single evangelist was present at each and every one of Christ's appearances.

§ Consequently, two kinds of contradiction are possible here: contradictions among the witnesses, and contradictions among the historians of these witnesses' statements.

§ Are contradictions present *now* among the witnesses? – These could only occur if an evangelist contradicted himself in reporting a particular occurrence which he had himself witnessed – or at least, if several evangelists gave mutually contradictory accounts of the same particular

occurrence at which each had been present. I know of no such contradictions.

§ Were contradictions *originally* present among the witnesses? – Apparent ones; and why not? For experience confirms – and it cannot possibly be otherwise – that, among several witnesses, each will see, hear, and consequently report differently the same event occurring at the same time and place. For the attention of each will be differently attuned. I do not believe it is even possible for the same witness, who observed the same occurrence with complete and deliberate attention, to deliver the same statement about it at different times. For a person's recollection of the same thing will be different on different occasions – unless, of course, he has learned his statement by heart. But in that case, he will not say how he now remembers the thing in question, but how he remembered it at the time when he memorised his statement.

§ Were *true* contradictions present among the witnesses – that is, contradictions which no fair comparison or more detailed explanation can remove? – How are we to know? We do not even know whether the witnesses were ever properly examined. At least there is no longer any record of such an examination, and anyone who says that there were such contradictions has in this respect as much justification as someone who denies it.

§ Except that someone who denies it can cite in his favour a very legitimate presumption which his adversary cannot adduce – namely that the great legal action which depended on the credible statements of those witnesses was successful. Christianity triumphed over the heathen and Jewish religions. It is there.

§ And are we now to let this successful action be reopened two thousand years later in the light of the incomplete and discordant reports of those – to judge by the successful outcome – credible and unanimous testimonies? Certainly not!

§ On the contrary, it does not matter how many contradictions there are in the reports of the evangelists! – They are not contradictions of the witnesses, but of the historians, not of the statements, but of the reports of these statements.

§ But the Holy Spirit had a hand in these statements! – Quite so, in the sense that it impelled each evangelist to report the matter as he understood it to the best of his knowledge and conscience.

§ What if the matter were known, and necessarily known, in one way to one of them and in a different way to the other? – Should the Holy Spirit rather, at the moment when they began to write, have rendered their different impressions uniform, and by their very uniformity suspect, or should it have let them retain their diversity, on which nothing whatsoever now depends?

§ Differences, it is said, are not the same thing as contradictions. – But if they are not, they become so at second or third hand. What was a difference among the eyewitnesses becomes a contradiction among those who know the matter only from hearsay.

§ Only a continuous miracle could have prevented such corruptions of the oral accounts of the resurrection from arising during the thirty to forty years before the gospels were written. But what right have we to assume this miracle? And what compels us to assume it?

§ Anyone who wilfully submits to such a compulsion is welcome to do so. But he should also know what is then required of him: he must resolve all the contradictions which occur in the various reports of the evangelists, and resolve them in a simpler and more natural way than has happened in the usual gospel harmonies.

§ And he should not rely too heavily on this or that work which he may only know by its highly promising title. Ditton[19] certainly showed the truth of the Christian religion *demonstratively* by means of the resurrection. But he completely ignored the contradictions of the evangelists, either because he believed that these contradictions had long since been resolved in the most incontrovertible manner – which I doubt; or because he considered that his demonstration, despite all these contradictions, retained its full validity – which is also my opinion.

§ Thomas Sherlock, in his *Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection*,[20] followed the same procedure. He confirms that the actual witnesses are completely trustworthy; but he does not address the contradictions in the reports of the evangelists.

§ Gilbert West[21] alone felt obliged to take some account of these contradictions in his plan. But anyone who is satisfied with his continual

[19] Humphrey Ditton, *A Discourse concerning the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1712).
[20] Thomas Sherlock, *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729).
[21] Gilbert West, *Observations on the History and Evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1747).

duplication of the same persons and phenomena must not be exactly difficult to satisfy.

§ Thus any man who asserts the infallibility of the evangelists' every word will find that plenty of work remains to be done here too. Let him make the attempt, and answer the ten contradictions which our fragment criticises. But let him answer them all. For merely to offer plausible resolutions of one or other of them and to pass the rest over with triumphant disdain is equivalent to answering none at all.